

There were three crows in the quiet nest on the roof of their small house. Avis perched on the windowsill of the metal workshop adjacent to the house, gazing at the birds wonderingly. The clean air made her spirit antsy, eager to explore and conquer and see. A warm wind brushed against her upward-tilted face, and she let the heat sink to her core.

Avis closed her eyes and picked at the idea that the crows had probably seen more of the world than her.

“Avis,” Lark called, “get off that window before a crow comes to peck at you.”

Avis half-smiled, sliding off the ledge and out into the sharp, dry grass. “If the crows come to peck at me,” she muttered, elbowing her sister, “they will come all together.”

Lark pulled a still-warm sword from the grass by her feet, tilting her head as she inspected it. “You’re right. I’ve never seen them apart.”

Plucking a dagger from the tree stump next to her, Avis began her careful inspection of the blade. Their father would have their heads if any of his weapons were even slightly imperfect. His customers would be astounded to find even a scratch on one of his products.

“Isn’t it like what father always says? ‘Us birds will always fly together?’” Avis asked, sliding a shiny weapon into its sheath.

Lark finished her scrutinizing and began tucking the weapons into a cart to move them. Dropping her weapons into the cart and taking one handle from her twin sister, Avis shoved forward.

“I think he was referring to us,” Lark considered, “but it seems as if the crows agree with the saying.”

The crows on their roof had been there for as long as Avis could remember. They were always together, just the three of them. Their dark wings were a stain on her crisp memories- as constant as her morning walks to the forge, arm in arm with her sister.

Their father, Hawk, had named his two daughters with intention. Lark was a sweet song, and Avis was a simple word that meant “bird.”

They were a family of birds.

The twins left the weapons outside of their house, and Lark shouldered open the front door. Avis watched her sister’s eyes flicker as she stepped inside. There was something brewing inside of Lark that Avis couldn’t quite discern.

Then again, there was something turbulent brewing inside of *her*.

Avis slid into the kitchen, throwing open cabinets and brandishing sharp kitchen knives to make herself dinner. Lark only sat down at the kitchen table, resting her face in her hands. The flickering yellow light that hung above her head cast strange shadows over her sharp cheekbones. Her coppery eyes glowed as she asked, “Avis, aren’t you going to tell me something?”

Avis’s stomach turned as she slowly lifted her eyes to meet her sister’s gaze. She brought the knife in her hand down on a carrot without looking. How could Lark possibly know what she had been dwelling on?

Avis swallowed, setting down the knife to wipe her sweaty hands on her shirt. “Don’t you think it’s a bit dull to work in father’s workshop all day?”

Something shifted in Lark’s face, a spark glowing in her eyes. “Do *you*?”

“I don’t think I could do it for the rest of my life, Lark.”

Avis's sister was silent for a moment. "Avis, if you left, I would be okay," she said gently.

Avis blinked at Lark, her brows furrowing. "Do you think our father will ever let me leave?"

"No, I don't think he will ever *let* you go," Lark whispered, no trace of doubt in her voice. Avis watched something intricate shift within her twin.

When they were children, Avis would tug Lark into the garden to show her pictures of the ocean. They would stare at illustrations of foreign cities and distant lands. "We'll go together," Avis would tell her. "We'll see huge fields of golden grass and hundreds of birds flying, Lark. We can watch them fly."

"Can we fly, too?" Lark asked once.

"No," Avis had answered, confused, "we can't fly."

Lark stared out the window, just past her sister. After a moment, she smiled. "You'll fly, Avis."

Now, Avis thrust a bowl of food in Lark's direction, trying to dispel the darkness from her twin's eyes. She sat down across from her.

"Were you going to sneak out tonight?" Lark asked Avis after a second, her voice deathly quiet.

Stomach dropping, Avis opened and closed her mouth in silence. Her throat dried out, and she hesitated, clutching her hands together.

Slowly, she nodded, thinking of the packed bags hidden underneath the kitchen sink. Lark took in her response with a small, tight breath.

When their father had started bringing Avis and Lark to work in the forge with him, Avis began to mark down each day with black ink on her wall. She watched the tick-marks grow as the years passed. Each day, she felt a little more confined to a life that she longed to escape. Bars were emerging from the soft Earth where she stood, blocking her from the world beyond her small town.

Avis knew she had to escape. After planning for weeks, she was hoping to tell Lark this evening, hoping to leave in the dark of the night.

She'd been blocking out the image of her father finding out, his face painted with hurt.

"Father knows," Lark whispered, her hands trembling as she lifted food to her mouth. "He found the bags. He's going to confront you when he comes inside."

Sucking in a tight breath, Avis slumped back against her chair. Panic pulsed in the back of her head. When she thought of spending another day in the workshop, she felt nauseous. The world was beckoning, and she could no longer resist its call.

"Help me," she said to her sister. "Please."

Lark squeezed her eyes closed and stood up. Without another word, she slipped from the room.

In the absence of her sister, Avis pressed her palms against her eyes. Lark was under no obligation to help her. *It will be for the best that she doesn't*, Avis thought. Shaking, she pulled herself up from the rough wooden chair and stepped forward. Her bags were in her hands in a matter of seconds. Her coat was on her shoulders, her boots on her feet. One of her father's daggers was strapped to her thigh. She stood in front of the mirror in the hallway, twisting her hair into a long braid.

Stepping up to the door, Avis took a breath. She placed a trembling hand on the handle.

She only paused when she noticed the absence of Lark's boots from their place by the mat. Lark *never* misplaced her boots. A slow epiphany began to dawn on her, clicking pieces of her conversation with her sister into place.

Had she really believed that Lark would let her face this alone?

Dread seeped through Avis's body, tingling in the tips of her fingers.

When Avis smelled smoke and heard the crackling of flame outside, she slammed the door wide open, sprinting into the yard.

"Avis!" She heard her father scream, "Get water!"

But Avis was glued in place, shock racking her senses. The workshop was on fire, bright and wild. The flames were blowing in the slight breeze, spreading their twining fingers to every corner of the workshop that they could reach.

Her desperate father was throwing buckets of water at the fire, his cheeks flushed and shining with sweat. His work was burning to the ground.

And, she realized with a start, so was her cage.

Lark appeared near her father, handing him another bucket of water. Her eyes danced around the area, only stopping their wild search when they landed on Avis. The fire glowed behind Lark, coloring her face in shades of red and orange.

She waved a hand at Avis, telling her to leave.

Lark wanted Avis to *leave*.

Stark realization hit Avis as she watched Lark half-heartedly throw water at the flames. Her father was scrambling around, his arms flailing. But Lark was just standing there.

*Avis, if you left, I would be okay.*

Lark *wanted her to leave*, she thought again, seeing light shine on the thought in a new way. Her heart twisted with love for her sister. Avis turned on her heel and ran, sucking in tight breaths as she went. Her eyes were burning, but not from the smoke.

“Avis!” An angry male voice raged from behind her. “*Avis!*”

She heard pounding footsteps and tried to pick up speed, but he grabbed her arms. She stumbled, pulling away. Her father only pulled her into his chest. Avis felt her pounding heart instinctively calm as his warmth enveloped her.

“Avis, what are you doing?” He asked, leaning back to look down into her eyes.

“I’m leaving,” she responded, her voice hoarse. “I have to leave.”

He shook his head, his lips pressing together. His next words were a familiar scolding. He told her that she needed to stay. She needed to stay because *he had a job for her*, because *he needed her help*, because *the world was too dangerous for her*.

Avis shook her head and kept shaking it. “I’m leaving,” she said firmly. With a jerk, she pulled out of her father’s arms.

He reached for her again, but she stepped away. “Don’t leave,” he yelled, “don’t leave this job behind.”

“I need to see what else there is out there.”

“It’s not worth leaving behind all that you already have,” her father screamed over the roaring of the fire. “Don’t leave *us* behind.” His voice nearly broke.

Avis tilted her head back, taking a deep breath. “I can’t stay here- I won’t stay here forever,” she whispered.

Above her, she heard the cawing of the three crows as they flew away from the fire. Even though there was something off about their flight, their call summoned some of the strength inside of Avis.

Her father stared up at the birds for a moment. “We fly together, Avis,” he muttered.

“How can we fly when you’ve tied our wings down?”

He flinched and opened his mouth to say something, but Lark’s voice broke the tension between them.

“Dad! There’s nothing left!” She screamed, her voice filled with false emotion.

As her father turned around to stare at the wreck of his workshop, Avis spun and ran away. The dry grass crunched and her feet slammed against hard soil.

She looked back, just once, from the top of the hill.

Standing there, gazing up at her from in front of the growing blaze, was Lark. On her face, a tiny, tiny smile.

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Avis stood on the deck of a ship, staring at an expansive, blue sea. Her eyes were distant and her mind was dark.

The image of Lark’s smile was glued to her vision, playing in her mind's eye constantly. When she saw the sea for the first time, *she* smiled. If not only for the beauty of the endless ocean, for the grin that would be on Lark’s face if she were there by Avis’s side. The moment her boots touched the ship, she vowed to come back for her sister someday.

Avis heard a commotion on the other side of the deck. She twisted around, drawn by the cacophony of frustrated voices.

Her eyes widened.

There were two black crows squawking wildly on the deck. They were hopping around, desperately trying to find an escape route. Avis caught a glimpse of a wounded wing. A burnt wing.

The birds couldn't fly.

A stray call drew her head upward. Her hair flew around her face as she watched a singular black crow soar through the clear sky.

The bird flew into the distance.

Avis listened to its calls grow quieter, her eyes fixed on the horizon.